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Coming Distractions: Two Kinds of Time

November 12, 2008 in [Coming Distractions](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [1 comment](#)

By Robert A. Kapp

The first big crush of incipient China specialists after World War II marched into America's graduate schools in the early and mid-1960s, particularly after the enactment of the National Defense Education Act made large amounts of federal money available for "Foreign Area Studies" and "Critical Language Studies."

I was one of the marchers. Having finished college, with virtually no exposure to anything Asian, in the spring of 1964, I began six long years of graduate study that fall. The new life began at 8 a.m. on, I think, September 22, in my first language class: Chinese I. It was a helpful day; even now, whenever someone Chinese tells me how good my Chinese is, I blurt out my first teacher's first injunction: always reply, "*Wo jiu hui jiang jiju hua*" (I can only speak a few words).

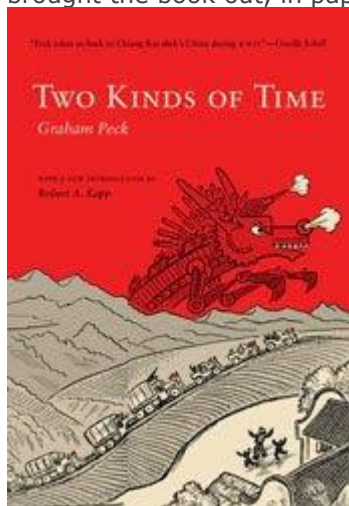
Our generation is now "senior," in the way that, for us, John Fairbank and George Taylor and Martin Wilbur and, slightly younger, Arthur and Mary Wright and Doak Barnett and John Lindbeck and others were "senior" when we were barely starting. Now, at least one highly accomplished member of my academic generation is soon to publish his own informative and entertaining memoirs.

Most of us studied in Taiwan under KMT military rule in the late sixties (access to the PRC was nonexistent), then made our first trips to the PRC in the mid-seventies, either shortly before or shortly after Mao's death. We see China through the lenses of decades of contact with the PRC.

I think I'm probably not alone in feeling powerful links to my own past in the China field, but also to the past that just pre-dated my arrival – the past of my mentors' experience, the past that held the powerful, gripping encounter of America and China during and after World War II, the past that saw the US-China confrontation in Korea and the political convulsions over Sino-American relations in both countries.

I sometimes envy young, bright MBAs from good U.S. schools who choose China instead of Dubai or Milan or Singapore for their next assignment; who arrive in China with little or no background on the country; and who are thus free to see China as it is in real time, with few referents from even the recent past. But, on balance, I think that the perspective of time really does matter tremendously, and hope that some of the newest generations of Americans to encounter China can gain something for tomorrow from yesterday's legacy.

With all that in mind, I recently encouraged the University of Washington Press to reprint my favorite China book of all time, Graham Peck's *Two Kinds of Time*, originally published in 1950. UW has now brought the book out, in paperback. Pieces of my modest Foreword to this new edition follow here.



Bringing Peck to new audiences, six decades after his great book appeared, is, for me, a labor of love. The book offers tremendous food for thought – about China then and now, radically changed and perhaps in some ways hardly changed at all; about the American experience with China, then and now; about Americans themselves, their politics, their sense of place in the world.

Above all, *Two Kinds of Time* is a masterpiece of writing, and of illustration. I'll let the Foreword speak for itself, but I hope that visitors to *The China Beat* will be intrigued enough by what they see online to get hold of the book, think about where we have been as they ponder where we're going — and above all get a sense of what great American writing about China really can be. We're entering a new Golden Age of writing about China, in my view, and dear Graham Peck, who died in obscurity as I labored through graduate school only a hundred and fifty miles from his Vermont home, unaware yet of his existence, offers a standard for the best of our contemporary observers to emulate.

Two Kinds of Time

(Excerpts from the Foreword by Robert A. Kapp)

It gives me great joy to celebrate the reappearance of the best book on China that I have ever read, Graham Peck's *Two Kinds of Time*, nearly six decades after its original publication. This book is at once hilarious and horrifying, heart-warming and heart-breaking, educational and entertaining. Peck's writing, and his talent as an illustrator, make for a unique book. The clarity of his vision, combined with the quietness of his voice, endow *Two Kinds of Time* with an enduring power.

I first encountered *Two Kinds of Time* in a rural New England used book shop in the summer of 1970. I had just finished graduate school, where I had done my research on conditions in West China in the years between the fall of the last dynasty, the Qing, in 1911 and the beginning of full-scale war with Japan in 1937. *Two Kinds of Time* picks up the story roughly from there, chronicling life in the "Great Rear Area" (those parts of central and West China still governed, however imperfectly, by the exiled Chinese Nationalist government), from the Japanese invasion to the end of the Pacific War in 1945.

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Graham Peck, born in 1914, was raised in Connecticut and attended college at Yale, not far from his home. After graduation in 1935, he set out on a *wanderjahr* which he expected to finance by selling his drawings. He got as far as China, where he planned to stay for a few weeks but wound up staying for a couple of years. His delightful and evocative *Through China's Wall*, chronicling his adventures during his first period in China, appeared in 1940. That year, he headed back to China for the sojourn that lasted through the end of the Second World War in the fall of 1945. *Two Kinds of Time* is his account of that long stay.

The China he re-entered in 1940 was three years into war with Japan. After six years of nibbling away at Chinese territories in northeastern China, starting with its seizure of Manchuria in 1931, Japan had marched into China proper in the summer of 1937. Over the next eighteen months, Japanese forces moved quickly southward and inland, seizing all the major eastern Chinese cities including Peking (now Beijing), Shanghai, Canton (Guangzhou), and Nanking (Nanjing), the city that had served as the seat of Chiang Kai-shek's National Government since 1927. As the occupation expanded up the Yangtze (Yangzi) River, a massive migration to the deep interior of China unfolded. The central government, which had first fled Nanking for the river city of Wuhan, six hundred miles inland from Shanghai, fled deeper into the interior in the fall of 1938. While the wartime exodus into southwest China had begun in 1937, the organs of Kuomintang (KMT) party and government authority, along with a mixed crowd of industrial, commercial, academic, and professional refugees, now settled down in Chungking (Chongqing), a dilapidated river metropolis in Szechuan (Sichuan) Province, another three hundred miles upriver and separated from Japanese-occupied territory by the impenetrable gorges of the Yangtze. Faculty and students—even libraries—of Chinese universities trekked inland from the sophisticated coastal cities to Chungking, the Szechuan capital of Chengtu (Chengdu), the Yunnan provincial capital of Kunming, and elsewhere in the unoccupied territories of the deep southwest.

By the time Peck made his way from the Kwangtung (Guangdong) coast near Hong Kong through Japanese-occupied lands into government-controlled territory in 1940, the Sino-Japanese war had stalemated. Peck entered a strange world of suspended animation. His observations and analysis of this odd environment are a cornerstone of his book's value.

Once the United States was at war with Japan, China became not just a distant, victimized recipient of American sympathy but a wartime American ally. Moreover, as the Pacific War unfolded, Chiang Kai-shek's Chungking regime rose, with American support, to become one of the "Big Four"—the United States, Britain, the Soviet Union, and China—whose alliance, according to American planners and propagandists, would win the war and configure the postwar world.

Peck stayed on the ground throughout the conflict. When he first arrived in wartime Nationalist territory in 1940, Americans were few and far between. Here, the narrative of *Two Kinds of Time* reads almost like a backpacker's diary. Once the United States and China came together in wartime alliance against Japan, the size and scope of the American presence in unoccupied China changed radically. For the first time in history, thousands of ordinary Americans, in military service, moved into China, diplomatic contacts between the two countries intensified, and a heroic image of America's Chinese ally, led by its towering leader Chiang Kai-shek, entered the American public consciousness. Peck himself went to work for the Office of War Information (OWI), one of the U.S. government's earliest efforts to employ what is now called "public diplomacy." Chungking, no longer assaulted by Japanese bombers from below the Yangtze Gorges as it had been earlier in Peck's time there, filled up with GIs, American reporters, and visiting American dignitaries. The U.S. Air Force set up forward fighter bases and rear-area heavy bomber bases in occupied areas for potential use in the final destruction of the Japanese home islands. American media reportage on China grew exponentially, in quantity if not in quality. Political interactions between Chungking and Washington expanded. Peck watched, took notes, and wrote.

By the time *Two Kinds of Time* appeared in 1950, Peck's wartime tale had become an elegy, and a bitter one at that. The civil war between Chiang's Nationalists and Mao Zedong's Communists, suspended in 1937, flickered back to life well before the Japanese surrender, and burst out fully immediately thereafter. Upon the Japanese surrender, the United States provided Chiang with crucial military and logistical support for his contest with the Communists, and continued to do so for most of the remainder of the Civil War. Washington, through General George Marshall, attempted unsuccessfully to mediate between Chiang and Mao Zedong in 1946 and 1947, and then watched as the Nationalist armies disintegrated and Chiang's regime evacuated to Taiwan.

Mao proclaimed the establishment of the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949. The accompanying political convulsion in the United States informs much of the second half of *Two Kinds of Time*. In the same year that the book appeared, U.S. and Chinese forces went into bloody battle in Korea. Writing with searing clarity of the collapse of an entire social system during the war years, Peck looked hopefully to a new and more just society in the new People's Republic and reflected painfully on what he saw as America's myopia in clinging to the discredited and defeated Nationalist regime.

Peck was twenty-six years old when he headed into China in 1940, and only thirty-one when he left after V-J Day in 1945. His experiences were those of a young man in a time and place where upheaval and uncertainty ruled. These are not the memoirs of a senior diplomat or a great statesman. They are the recordings of travels, of labors, and, above all, of encounters with people noble and base, wise and incredibly foolish.

Tags: [Graham Peck](#), [Two Kinds of Time](#)